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United States Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service

Fishery Leaflet 190

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Turtle Trapping

Indiscriminate destruction of turtles is to be discouraged. Turtles may be beneficial as well as detrimental to man's interest. The extermination of turtles from a pond should not be made until it has been shown that they are undesirable in a local situation. Studies have shown that turtles, in general, are not harmful to wildlife, except perhaps at waterfowl sanctuaries and at fish hatcheries where they may be controlled.

Turtles may be classified as scavengers and are excellent food for man. To conserve the smaller turtles, it is recommended that the mesh of traps be not smaller than three inches. Before any of the methods described are employed for collecting turtles, conservation authorities in the area in which they are to be used, should be consulted as to the acceptability of the method as some States have laws regulating turtle trapping.

The best places for turtle trapping are in the quiet water areas of streams, ponds, and lakes in shallow water, preferably over soft bottoms, near water lilies or weed beds.

The seasons for trapping are spring, summer, and early fall. Through the remainder of the year, except in the "deep" South, turtles hibernate. During this time they probably do not feed, making trapping ineffective.

Snappers and Soft-Shelled Turtles

While they are in hibernation, the snapping turtles can often be taken in quantity from spring holes, from under old logs, old muskrat holes, and soft bottoms of waterways under the ice. The method of capture employed is a stout hook, made by bending an iron rod at one end and sharpening the hook end. The other end of the rod is used for probing into the mud or soil to locate the turtles. The hunter probes about in the bottom mud until a turtle, which feels much like a chunk of wood, is located. It is then pulled out with the hook. Turtles are inactive during the winter and offer little resistance to capture, although large ones may prove difficult to land even by experienced hunters. Turtle collectors rely upon their hunting instincts and experience to locate hibernating turtles. When one is found it pays to explore the surrounding area carefully as several snappers often hibernate together. This method of capture is called "noodling".

Snappers and soft-shelled turtles are sometimes taken on set lines baited with cut fish or other fresh meat. One device that has been

recommended is to tie four or five feet of line to a stout flexible pole six to eight feet long. About 12 inches of steel wire (No. 16) is placed between the hook and line. A stout hook about one inch across between barb and shaft is preferred. The end of the pole is pushed into the bank far enough to make it secure and at an angle that will fish the bait a few inches above the bottom.

Snappers and soft-shelled turtles may also be taken readily in baited fyke or hoop nets (Figure 1). These barrel shaped traps may sometimes be purchased on the market or they may be made from three-inch square mesh of Number 24 linen seine twine. The length of the trap should be from four to six feet from front to back hoop. Three to five hoops per trap, 30 inches in diameter, made of wood or six-gauge steel wire with welded joints may be used. The funnel shaped mouth should be 18 inches deep from front hoop to the opening inside. The entrance opening of the funnel is one inch and 20 inches wide. The corners of the opening are tied by twine to the middle hoop. The rear end or "box" end may be closed with a purse string. The net, after the hoops have been installed, should be treated with a preservative of tan-bark, copper oleate, tar, or asphalt. To keep the trap extended stretchers of wood or steel wire, about nine gauge or larger, are fastened along each side to prevent the trap from collapsing.

Coarse mesh poultry wire may be substituted for the twine. If this is done, the frame will be approximately 30 inches square. The shape and dimensions of the entrance as specified should be the same in all traps since it is easily negotiated by the turtles. The dimensions of the trap may be altered for ease of transportation. A door may be installed in the top to facilitate removal of turtles and baiting. Entrance funnels may be placed on each end if desired.

One writer recommends baiting the trap with fish or fish heads, chicken entrails, or other juicy animal remains. These baits should be fresh since snapping or soft-shelled turtles may not be attracted by spoiled food. Watermelon rinds are said to be good bait for soft-shelled turtles. The bait should be placed in a tin can fitted with a lid and perforated with holes to permit the juices to exude into the water. The can is hung in the middle of the trap. This method of baiting lengthens the time of usefulness of the bait as it cannot be eaten by the first turtle trapped.

Turtle traps set with the tops of the hoops just out of the water will permit the turtles to obtain air, lessen their struggles to escape and other turtles enter the trap more freely. It is necessary to set them this way if the turtles are to be taken alive. Traps set in streams must be anchored. If the water is too deep for the top of the trap to be out of the water, short logs can be lashed to each side to float the trap. The mouth should be set down-stream as turtles enter more readily when set in this position.

Painted Turtles and Cooters

Because of their habits the manner of capture of the cooters is different from that of the snapping and soft-shelled turtles. They cannot be taken in numbers during the winter as snappers are because they do not congregate in their hibernating places. Neither do they respond to baiting as well as the snapper and soft-shelled turtles. In the summer they are gregarious, crowding together in numbers on projecting logs and banks. By taking advantage of this fact, the "basking" species may be taken by sinking a box in a place turtles are using. The turtles crawl upon the top side of the box to "bask" in the sun and many of them manage to fall into the trap (Figure 2).

The top frame of the box may be constructed from discarded telephone poles, imperfect ties or logs about eight inches in diameter. Old natural unpainted wood is preferred. The logs are mitered at each end to fit together and make the inside enclosure two to three feet square. About half of each log from the top center to the inside under center is lined with zinc or galvanized metal. From the outside water edge to the top of each log cleats can be nailed or the logs made rough so turtles can easily climb on top. Galvanized wire with a mesh of one inch if all sizes, or of three inch if only larger turtles are desired, can be used to form a wire basket fitting the opening between the logs. Staples, hooks, or wire may be used for fastening the basket to the logs. Some trappers prefer to use bait while others leave the traps unbaited. Turtles that have dropped into the trap are unable to climb out over the zinc or galvanized metal covering. The trap should be fastened to a stump or some other permanent anchor. For the capture of snapping and soft-shelled turtles the trap could be modified by installing funnel-like entrances on one or two sides as described for the hoop traps.

Another type of trap consists of a box with an inclined board for a slide leading up to it. The turtles climb up the slide to bask and drop off into the box. Figure 3 shows the same trap with pivotal boards so placed that turtles crawling out on the boards overbalance on the terminal end and are dropped into the box.

Care of Trapped Turtles

The traps should be visited daily. If they have been properly set, the turtles which are caught can get air and will remain alive. If you are interested in turtle conservation you will free the small ones to grow larger. The larger ones may be carried home in a moist burlap sack. They may be placed in a tub, tank or live box and kept for several days. Only two or three inches of water is needed. The turtle may be fed on table scraps, both animal and vegetable. Care should be taken to keep the tank in a sanitary condition as the water may foul badly from particles of food unless cleaned regularly or replenished by a constant supply of fresh water.

The first task in cleaning the turtle is to chop off its head and feet so it can neither bite nor claw you. To chop off the snapper's head, let it snap at a stick. It holds on tenaciously and the head can be readily pulled forward. The heads of the other species may be made to protrude by applying pressure with the foot to the back or upper part of the shell. Sometimes the head can be made to protrude by lifting the tail and hind legs off the ground. After the head and feet have been removed, if the turtle is large, nail to a post or other object, belly out. Cut along the shell around each of the four limbs and pull the skin off over each leg. The belly shell of snapping and soft-shelled turtles may be separated from the back shell by cutting through the suture between the two with a knife. If the incision is made in the right place, separation of the two shells is easily accomplished. Having cut the bridges, the belly-plate may be removed by carefully cutting it away from the meat underneath. A hatchet or meat saw may be used to part the upper and lower shells of other turtles. The entrails are removed and the quarters may be easily obtained by cutting to disjoint them from the shell. The tail and neck should also be skinned out. If the turtle is large, the ribs can be cut with a hatchet and the tenderloin removed from the "ceiling" of the upper shell.

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